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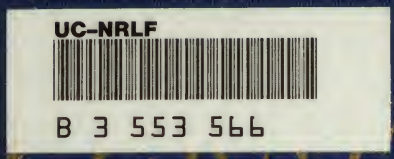

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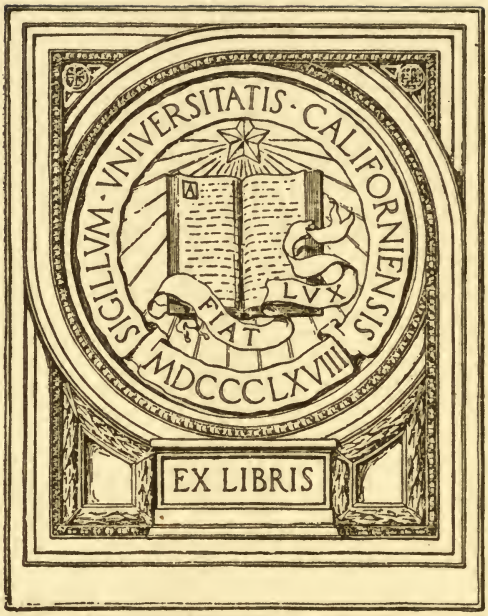
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VERSE BY VANCE THOMPSON

Dorothy Thompson

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VANCE THOMPSON

The Night Watchman
and Other Poems

MITCHELL KENNERLEY
NEW YORK *MCMXV*

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PRINTED IN AMERICA

TO
MY WIFE

343594

DEDICATION

Soul of my soul—this night!
(Gray skies over Brussels and a wind that
comes from the North)
And wild, alert and bright
My soul goes forth—
Over the tangled seas and foam,
Over the green sea-waste, that lies
Like a misty dream between us—home
To you and you and your mouth and eyes,
Soul of my soul, your eyes—

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Sed, nisi forte tuas melior sonus avocat aures,
Et nostris aliena magis tibi carmina rident,
Vis hodierna tua subigatur pagina lima?

CALPURNIUS SICULUS.

THE NIGHT WATCHMAN

I DO not think it safe to sleep,
Since He who kept the watch is dead,
And living things may prowl abroad
In the night, with none to keep
The door against them when they come.
Not safe . . . It is not safe to sleep,
Since men have killed the warder . . . God.

Ever He watched me in the night;
At two short paces from my bed
He sat, like one who keeps the guard,
His arms upon His knees, His hands
Clasped on His sword-hilt . . . eternal God,
Patient, immutable and dumb.

Now, I am here alone; the door is barred,
My window is sealed with iron bands,
Yet nightly, things that are not dead,
Enter the window and door and creep
Over the cold flags of the floor. . . .

(Ay, here even in my tower.
Knee-deep in the sands,
Girt round by the seas . . .
By the sleepless, clashing flood . . .

THE NIGHT WATCHMAN

My tower of pride and granite stands;
And ever about it, evermore,
The sentinel winds go. . . . Over it lower
Clouds of agate and blood,
Menacing; always the clouds.)

Night comes. . . . Oh, in the night an hour,
The unavoidable hour in the night,
When every man born of woman, dreams;
And dreaming, he sees women appear,
Chained together and dragging shrouds,
(Spotted with blood like a black sky with stars)
And sleeping he groans; and his bed seems
A quadrature of molten bars;
And groaning he wakes. . . . Lo, in the darkness things
(With hands and mouths) more horrible than dreams!

O, well I know the hour
And the dream I wake from . . . here
In my violated tower . . .
Wake from . . . covered with wounds,

THE NIGHT WATCHMAN

Dazed with the thickness of fear,
Like a black smoke, in my brain;
And a blindness in my eyes.

(I hear the familiar sounds . . .
The seas at the knees of my tower,
The gulls and their rhythmic wings
And the cries of the wind and rain.)
And here, lo, here, lo, here,
Close to my bed the living things—
Mouths like the gash of a spear,
Hands, with fingers and rings,—
In the darkness the living things!

Sleep? But men have slain the Lord,
Even God, who kept the watch and ward
At two short paces from my bed,
His hands clasped on His mighty sword. . . .
Sleep? Who dare sleep now God is dead?

ANDANTE

LADY, what of lovers true,
When they lie down, two by two,
Under linen bands and rue,
Dead . . . who loved so truly?

In the dim earth lie they low,
Side by side, and do not know;
With the worm for bed-fellow,
Dead . . . who loved so truly.

Through the shroud and linen band,
They can touch nor knee nor hand,
Give nor take nor understand,
Dead . . . who loved so truly.

Over them the dim years flow;
Life calls to them "Live!" and, lo,
They are flower and flower and know . . .
They who love so truly.

So they pass the cycle through,
Love and die and live anew,
Side by side; for lovers true,
Love but once: Forever!

IMMORTALITY

I LAY my love upon you. . . .
You shall know the gladness and the sorrow,
All the hopes that wait upon to-morrow
And wither with the years.

I lay my love upon you. . . .
You shall walk in darkness and in glory;
Men shall make of you a song . . . the story
Of your sad love and tears.

I lay my love upon you. . . .
Maidens wandering in moon-haunted places,
Shall remember your love, and their faces
Be pale with love and fears.

I lay my love upon you. . . .
Calm and mystic, veiled therein, forever
You shall walk with those who love, and never
Shall perish in the years.

THE HILLS

I SHALL go down from the bland and idle hills
From the waters and the wind in the pines;
I shall be he who doth the thing he wills,
Heedless of the portents and the signs;

Caring no whit for the winding of the road,
Nor for those that I pass upon the way,
Stout-cloaked against all weather, fare abroad,
Noting not if it be night or day.

I shall go down to the press of roofs and walls,
To the stone and the iron and the brass—
Hear not again the night-bird when he calls,
Never lie again among the grass.

(Never more dawn, flushing up among the trees,
And the wonder of it faint on the lake;
No more for me—and what care I who sees?
What I leave of dawn let others take!)

WHEN LOVE DIED

I KISS your hands, your garment's hem,
And each kiss is a requiem:

I kiss your lips and morbid eyes,
And each kiss is a love that dies:

I lay my hands upon your hair
As though I laid wan lilies there:

Over your little breasts I place
A white thing colder than a cloud,

Over your little breasts and face
I lay my dead love . . . like a shroud.

So, with a shroud I cover it. . . .
The face wherein love's shame was writ,

As in a book one dare not read . . .
Love's tragedy of thought and deed:

Cover it close that none may see
Dead love rot into infamy.

DAYBREAK

DWARF roses and dead lavender . . .
The false, white gown of woven wool
Fain of strange lights and colorful,
Beneath the shifty lamp ablur;

A noise of tangled winds that cry
At the pale windows . . . all the high,
Uneasy winds of dawn astir;

The bruised mouth where the shadows creep,
The lips all drooping, fain of sleep,
The hot breath, heavier than myrrh;

And in the tired unholy eyes
The weariness of love that dies,
Love's faintness in the throat of her . . .
Dwarf roses and dead lavender. . . .

TWILIGHT

SHE

THERE is no mystery, she saith.
Look down into the pits of death,
Where blue sleep lieth, fold on fold;
Look up, where God's white pardon waits
Forever at the open gates;
See, then, my hair all gold,
Good for a man to kiss and hold
And play with, as the hours spin by. . . .

HE

Your hair and lips and eyes,
Your dark nostalgic eyes.

SHE

See, then, how quick your kisses dry,
How fast our vagrom folly flies,
And all my hair, that now you twist
In gyves around your listless wrist,
Is dying, as you turn it . . . so. . . .

TWILIGHT

HE

Your dark, incessant eyes,
Your hair and lips and eyes!

NIGHT

THE sky is made of silver and of stone,
Glacial in its quiet; in the deep of it
turn
The wind-mills of the constellated stars . . .
Broad bars of gold and ether; they are blown
By winds whose ways we know not . . . haze
And gold the wind-wings are that burn
And turn, grinding His grist. . . .

God, what a night!
Look up and see
The icy, vague immensity
Through which those starry arms gesticulate.

Shadows underneath and sepulchres
And lonely graves in which dead women
lie . . .
Shadows and graves, and one is hers.

Dead hours, dead kisses and the dead . . .
Hist!
The cohorts of the dead are up to-night,
Wailing and wandering, their arms outspread,
Under the windmills of His universe,
Wandering and wailing. . . .

NIGHT

"Ho! ye dead . . . who come trailing
Your garments, woven of dark and damp and density
Of vaults . . . for whom
Hold ye lean arms out? Back to the flame
Or asphodels! Back to the tomb
Or nothingness, whence ye came!
Why come ye up to show the scars
And the haggard eyes of old? . . .
Down, woman . . . go back . . . and sleep . . . sleep. . . ."

She must be dead. I saw her lie, cold,
Lean, bloodless, inarticulate,
Moaning but faintly . . . and once the child cried;
So making very little noise they died. . . .
A cottage by the Arno-side,
And the stars came up on Tuscany, blanched, white,
As her dead face was, there. . . .

God's might!
The night is grey with horror and with shame. . . .

NIGHT

See . . . the windmills of the constellated
stars
Whirl in the night their wings of flame . . .
Ether and ice, the bars.

THE DEAD VIRGIN

I WEEP those dead lips, white and dry,
On which no kisses lie,
Those eyes deserted of desire,
And love's soft fire.

I weep the folded feet and hands,
Held fast in linen bands;
Still heart, cold breasts . . . for them my dole;
God has the soul.

THE BLACK WINDS

DEAR God! About mine House to-
night
The Black Winds coil in wrath,
And to my lonely hearth, Your white
Kind Heralds find no path.

No hands are laid upon my hair,
No gentle Angels pass
Across my floor . . . in garments fair,
That shine and chime like glass.

I watch the dying firelight's scroll . . .
The flames that tug and toil;
And round Mine House and round my
Soul
The Black Winds Coil.

WHO WALKS WITH NATURE

WE dwell together, she and I,
In vague and vast complicity.
I know the secret of her suns,
The mystery of her moons and stars,
Her hooded moons and cryptic stars.

The four winds are her clarions,
The sheeted dead her nenuphars;
In her grey gardens overhead
We walk between the sheeted dead.
Ho! white they stand, so white they are,
White lily and blanche nenuphar.

We walk among them, she and I
In gradual complicity.

The four winds are her clarions.
With the young night her signal runs
Across the world . . . the risen dead,
(Long dead, long risen) troop for us;
Their shrouds have rotted shred by shred,
Their faded souls are dolorous
And grey from going to and fro
Along the interminable skies.

WHO WALKS WITH NATURE

I meet the knowledge in their eyes. . . .
Their pale eyes full of irony.
Long dead, long risen; faith is dead
And hope has rotted shred by shred,
And there is only irony.

We walk among them, she and I,
In reticent complicity.

I know the secret of her suns,
The signal of her clarions,
The mystery of her hooded skies
And of the hooded dead, whose eyes
Are dark with thought and irony
And cynical complicity.

Ho! brother of the sheeted dead,
Who walks with nature? To and fro,
Like linen flags, her signals go,
Beneath which troop the quick and dead.

THE SWALLOW

THERE'S a swallow flying to Venice,
And sick for a sight of the sea,
O, wayfarer, O, swallow,
Fly light and low, I would follow
To the dim blue isles of Venice,
And the blue, dim light of the sea.

I am sick for the strange, new faces
For the flags and the ships and the sea,
For the new strange life and the singing
For the boatman's cries and the ringing
Of bells in the windy places,
And the windy foam on the sea.

O, swallow flying to Venice,
And eager for sight of the sea,
O, wayfarer, O, swallow,
Fly light and low, I would follow
To the dim blue isles of Venice,
And the blue, dim sight of the sea.

HUMANUM GENUS

(A German Legend.)

THE eagle in his eyrie
Hangs to hear;

The blue-tipped heron wary
Flies in fear;

The squirrel clings close and fast
To th' elm-bole;

And the sly, red fox slinks past
To his hole;

A timorous, silent shadow
Flits the doe;

And the panting hare i' the meadow
Crouches low;

The gray wolf in the furze,
With sullen eyes,

'Mid stones and bracken burs,
Brooding lies;

HUMANUM GENUS

Wild ducks sail to the edges
Of the pool;

The fish sink into the sedges,
Dark and cool;

All hushed and watchful lie,
Sullen, subdued;

A man comes whistling by.
Goes through the wood.

THE SATYRS

"Tum Satyri, lasciva cohors, sibi pocula quisque
Obvia corripiunt: quod sors dedit, hoc capit usus.
Cantharon hic retinet; cornu bibit alter adunco;
Concavat ille manus, palmasque in pocula vertit;
Pronus at ille lacu bibit, et crepitantibus haurit
Musta labris; alius vocalia cymbala mergit;
Atque alius latices pressis resupinus ab uvis
Excipit; at potis saliens liquor ore resultat,
Spumeus inque humeros et pectora diffluit humor
Omina ludus habet; cantusque chorosque licentes,
Et venerem jam vina movent. . . ."

CALPURNIUS.

THE SATYRS

"PRAY, shall we walk abroad, Marquise?
The park is very still to-night,
Brown twilight broods among the trees,
There are no censuring stars alight."

"Ho . . . yonder!"
"Gently, knave, I say!
I crave your highness' pardon . . . they
Are rakish, harmless friends of mine
Begging me taste their skin of wine,
Three satyrs, humble friends, Marquise,
With whom . . ."
"They frightened me . . . at first."

"First sight, madame, is always worst."
"And will they dance for me, your friends?"
"Or die, Marquise, to make amends."
"One tilts a skin of wine and stains
His hollow face and scanty beard;
One shakes a branch."
"The rascal feigns
That he is Lydian Hercules;
But see his eye. . . ."
"Monsieur, he leered!"

THE SATYRS

"And yonder on the misty ground
Squats one who blows a rustic pipe;
See the knave's crooked fingers gripe
The slender reed . . . and hark, the sound!
A mad, green music, eh, Marquise?
Dying among the somber trees."

"Their dance, Monsieur?"
"Dance, satyrs, dance!
Ho! how the goat-hoofed rascals prance,
The dead leaves creaking out a tune."
"Monsieur, O, stop them! See . . . the moon!"

PAN

MAN, 'twas a satyr, hoof, horn and hide;
I came upon him alone one night
In a greenish wood; he was howling tight,
With a tun of wine by his side. . . .

Man! an oaken cask of golden wine!
"Sit down," says the satyr, "cheek by jowl,
Here's a shard to drink from, yours and mine,
And we'll look at the moon and howl."

We sat through the waste of useless hours
In the greenish wood at night.
His head was crowned with the gold of flowers,
And he sang to the pale moonlight.

Man, 'twas a satyr! For far and wide
I travel the woods by day and night
But I find him not. . . . He was howling tight
With a tun of wine by his side.

REPUDIÉ

YOU will not have my love, being tired of its lips
And adoration? Well, let it go down to the ships
That sail toward the hazard of capes and curling seas
And long lascivious hills; go forth . . . and dwell with these.

Let it go forth this love of mine,
And wet its mouth with lethal wine,
And gay and mad and drunk and red,
Ride down the highway of the dead;
On some lean horse of soot and fire,
Spur down life's road of rust and mire
And trampled lust and black desire. . . .
Let it ride forth this love of mine.

You will not keep my love nor house it warm
From the Novembral nights and winter storm;
Let it fare forth, with wet, unseeing eyes,
And find the midnight faces and the lips
That murder love with kisses till He dies . . .
That suck his mouth until his faint life drips
Away in sweat and acid, gasp and moan.

REPUDIÉ

You will not have my love; and that is
best: . . .
For if your soul was bruised with my bitter
cries,
Lo, I have sucked a bitter, bitter breast
And drunk the secret of unholy eyes!

You will not have my love; let it be so. . . .
What would you with it? For it was a cry
And a turmoil in the night. Clashing spears
And clang of iron swords were in my ears;
And you, a red prey, lank of limb and thigh,
Raped from a battlefield to love . . . and die,
Your mouth gagged with weeds and spittle
and mud.

You will not have my love, although you know
The hidden beauty of my lust and the slow
Secret kisses . . . when the song wakes in
your blood. . . .

She will not have us, Love . . . fare forth
and go.

THE CITY

THE city is of charcoal and of blood,
Of stars and night, of gilt and ebony.
Electric bulbs pour down a flood
Of pale and frozen mystery—
The riddle of the white poles—upon the town
Making it wonderful.

A girl walks there in black.

On her hat the white flare of a plume, all white,
The white of her throat as she sways well back,
The lift of her gown—
Brightly she laughs and takes the light—
("For whom," I whisper, "God, for whom?")

This night, all night, the lean dogs of desire
Have bayed upon my track,
Yelping, keen of scent, afire
To pull me down—there
In the flare of the town.

A girl walks there in black.

"Hist! you with the ruddled cheek
And the white-plumed hat!
Toward what defiled paradise walk you,
child?
What feverish Walhalla tempts you (speak!),
Where the wild horses' ribs are crumpled
Under the temptuous thighs of goddesses,
Walhalla! Hist! girl in black, toward what?
Wan nights and broken dawns? The rumpled
Bed-linen and torn boddices.
To that?"

A girl walks there in black: saying—

"The South wind is my breath
My eyes are the sea,
I am sweet as poison and death
And all men come to me.

"My house is built of dusk
And starlight; and within
There is a cloud of musk
And a taper shines small and thin.

"Those who come to me there,
Weave with me, thread and thread,
The garments I shall wear
When I rise with the dead.

"Of shame and love and doom
Of bruise and cry and kiss,
Purple and black on the loom
Is the robe we weave amiss.

"My house is built of mist
And moonlight; come—within
We shall sit wan and kissed,
Weaving the shroud of sin."

("For whom," I whisper, "dear, for whom,
Shall the shroud be woven?")
Laughter and myrrh
Her mouth is, the flower mouth of her;
And her eyes are the sea; and life
In her young body urges and thrills;
Saying: "I wait for him with the knife,
The sudden man—who kills."

IN BROADWAY

I WALK in Broadway to and fro
With the taciturn ghost of Edgar Poe.
Girls idle for us when the lights
Are red on the pavements there o' nights.
Girls sidle with strenuous eyes for us,
With gestures urgent and amorous;
But we mock them, pacing to and fro—
I and the ghost of Edgar Poe.

"Dear ghost," I say to him, "to and fro
As you walked in Broadway long ago
Did the small girls idle for you and cry?"
"Ho! the black stars swung in a yellow sky
One night, one night—and a woman came
Out of a harem of wind-blown flame;
But the lips that she laid on mine were snow—
Bitter as ice," says the ghost of Poe.

I make the sign of the cross.

HERE AND HEREAFTER

THE woman was dead; and her body lay
Enshrouded, coffined and in the clay,
A small, blonde body kissed over much—
It ripened, rotted and fell at a touch.
But her small, blonde soul was not afraid
To go thus naked, and, undismayed,
It walked abroad in the evening air,
Along the streets where the night-lamps flare,
Idling strenuously there.

Her small, blonde soul minced up and down
The flippant streets of the gas-lit town;
Its pale eyes ogled to left and right,
Its smile was lambent, teasing and bright—
Pst! Pst! The lips of it framed it again
The cooing, sibilant call to men.
Pst! Pst! And she lounged along Broadway,
Through yellow lights and shadows gray,
Idling, strenuously gay.

The small, blonde soul of her paused before
A house with the black crêpe on the door.
There stood the soul of a man new-dead.
Pst! Pst! His dazed soul turned its head,

And the eyes went hot and the lips laughed,
"Well?
Lead the way." And she led his soul to hell.

Pst! Pst! At night where the late lamps glow,
The small, blonde form loiters to and fro,
Idling, strenuously slow.

SYMBOLS

MY palace is of smoke and rain,
And from the window I look forth
And see a blurred, tumultuous train
Glide through a tunnel to the North,
Beaconed by lantern-lights of blood.

My palace is of storm and flood,
And through the window-panes I see
The white stars miming oracles
To the dead sand and sleeping sun—
Stars sign and cry aloud like bells.

My palace is of black basalt,
The stars which mimed in the blue vault
Have passed with dark, averted cowls.

I see the city's fitful light
(Lamps winking like the eyes of owls)
Men, mad with dreams, shout to the night.

THE NAKED MEN WITH TORCHES

TO the sordid horizon the fields stretch brown,
Sterile and sere; rimmed—as the sun goes down—
With copper and smoke; naked of fruit or grain;
Only the evil weeds lift high in the plain
Their chalices of poison—
The pastures are dead;
The trees are rotting and the birds have fled;
But the desultory suave serpents slide, pass
Through the dwarf jungles of the tarnished grass;
And dazed and dour the undying peasant stands,
The mock and martyr of his wasted lands.

In the huge cities gloom palaces and gaols;
Through red-lit streets wanton the avid girls,
Silky and perfumed, carbuncled with pearls,
The girls!
Go wantoning prince and flute-player,
Obscene with drunkenness, with filleted hair,
Carolling shrill songs to their derisive Baals—

THE NAKED MEN WITH TORCHES

Princes and flute-players, trilling silver lauds
To the gods, the old humiliated gods;
And the avid girls—
Over the roofs and towers,
Curtaining palaces and gaols, there lowers
Monstrous, nocturnal, the smoke; beneath it whirr
The iron wheels that birr
An iron monotone in the iron hours;
And gaunt slaves turn the wheels—
Ho! up they sweep,
Haggard and mad and stark, the slaves o' the wheel,
With wolfish sickles anhungered to reap
In the last red harvest of blood and steel:—
The naked men with torches!
Up they stream,
Gaunt, the Ten-To-One, claiming their heritage,
Avid for girls and flute-players—and the Dream!
Avid for drunkenness and surfeit and lust,
The naked fellows with sickles! parched with rage

And lean from dining on the winnowed dust.
Up! Up! old Ten-To-One! Who'll say you nay?
Take what you will! Have yon fat priest to pray,
Rhetors of science to scratch your hairy loins,
Girls, silky and obscene, to tumble and play
And dope you with kisses, for a jink o' coins;
Summon prince and flute-player for your idle hours,
Paphian music and bawdy songs and flowers,
Stuck in your grimy hair!
Take what you will,
Old Yahoo! And who stops you, then? Go, swill
At the Madeira, lick the clotted cream;
Souse you in ease or cruelty, good or ill,
Capture your harlot, flute-player—and the Dream!
Are you sated, Satyr?
You there with the torches!
Then forth with you from palaces and porches,
Into the fields and whistle you back the birds—

THE NAKED MEN WITH TORCHES

Out of the obscure caves and cathedral woods
And the augural night—
Hist! the blue flight of birds!
Lift your head, gaunt fellow, hear the song
and the words
And the lilt and glamour of old primeval
moods,
And clangor of love in the air—
And there
Dull with toil of the soil your brother stands,
The eternal peasant with the empty hands,
Who stares at the old earth and broods—
And broods.

FRUSTRA SIGNAS LAPIDEM

ALONG the level sea all night
The shining squadrons pass,
Their sandalled steps ring sharp and slight,
As though they marched on glass,
Moonlit, starlit, the level sea
Is quiet as a road,
And all my hopes troop lustily
To storm the hold of God.

Afar it lies, and very far,
Across the level sea,
But they shall know it by the star
God's knave swings faithfully.
All night they march, till dawn is come,
And they can see the tower,
And hear the rolling of the drum
That marks the morning hour.

Then up the sun comes, red and broad
And insolent is he;
They cannot see the tower of God,
He shines so fearfully.
The tepid sea runs gray and high

And all my hopes troop home,
For they do fear the blazing sky
And dread the running foam.

But in the time when nights are long,
And dawn is loth and late,
With gonfalon and horn and song
They shall march to the gate;
Across a sea that rings like glass
And level as a road,
The squadrons of my hopes shall pass
And storm the hold of God.

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